Through an avenue of diamond-leaved trees they moved and it seemed to the soldier that all the stars in heaven had fallen to earth to hang in the trees.

He took the smallest twig.
It seemed a sin to damage such beauty.



Then they came to a lake.
Twelve boats, beside each
a man, tall, handsome.

The twelve princesses each climbed into a boat. The soldier stepped swiftly into the boat with the youngest, just as it slipped from the strange shore.

As he rowed across, the man felt the boat to be unusually heavy. They lagged just a little behind. But he had eyes only for the girl and so did not see the dark shadow of the soldier.

The soldier was shown to their chamber. Twelve beds with rich covers. He was led to an antechamber, then the door to the two rooms was locked.

For a while he could hear the princesses talking, laughing, as they settled to sleep. The youngest came to him with a cup of wine and a smile like frost on glass.

"*My sisters would like you to have this,*" she said.

He took the cup and pretended to take a deep drink from it, then lay down and closed his weary eyes. And he listened.

